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ABSTRACT

Understanding the absence of composition in western Canada is predicated upon understanding the presence of composition in the United States, the only country in the world with a highly visible tradition of composition. This absence in western Canada, between 1900 and 1950, is largely a matter of appearance--composition in both countries was an institutional requirement. The blending of composition and literature, however, was the dominant pattern of instruction in western Canada, a pattern inherited from Harvard, where many professors had studied. After 1950 the two federal governments' responses to the Cold War and subsequent funding of postsecondary education differed. Canada established the Massey Commission which, after hearing presentations from art groups, university representatives, and others, resulted in federal funding of universities in 1952, and, in 1957, in funding of the humanities. American federal support for the arts has consistently been a practical, rather than a philosophical issue. For Canadian scholars in the 1960s to have turned to composition and rhetoric as a research agenda would simply have been to Americanize the curriculum and to pursue a low art rather than a high culture. Rhetoric and composition have not yet made, and may never make, a significant impact in western Canadian English departments and universities as long as researchers continue to pursue and governments continue to fund high culture. (Contains 24 references.) (CR)

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Understanding the Absence of Composition in Western Canada: A Brief History

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Understanding the Absence of Composition in Western Canada: A Brief History

Understanding the absence of composition in western Canada is predicated upon understanding the presence of composition in the United States. What I mean by this absence/presence relationship is that the U. S. is the only country in the world with a highly visible tradition of composition, and a history of composition that starts with the U.S. as a frame of reference will likely come to the conclusion that composition in other countries like Canada is absent from university curriculums and not a subject of scholarly research. In this brief history of composition in western Canada, then, I would like to play off the presence of composition in the U.S. in two ways: first, by suggesting that the absence of composition in western Canada between 1900 and 1950 is largely a matter of appearance. I really need a full paper to develop this argument, but for now I will emphasize that composition in both countries was an institutional requirement and English departments held antirhetorical views of language. I will, however, limit my discussion of this point so that I may play off the presence of composition in the U.S. in a second way: arguing that the absence of composition in western Canada from the 1950s on is a literal absence, and it is during the 1950s and 60s that composition in the U.S. and Canada really move in different directions. In short, the argument of my paper is that before 1950, composition instruction in western Canada was not significantly different from composition instruction in the U.S. But the impact of the Cold War on federal funding of universities in both Canada and the U. S. during the 1950s and 60s altered the paths that composition took in the two countries. In particular, the 1949-1951 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences made possible the professionalization of the humanities and the pursuit of high culture throughout Canada. With federal support going to the study of literature, there was little impetus to professionalize writing instruction.

I am focusing on the provincial universities of western Canada--Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia--throughout this paper because that is where I have gone to school and am doing archival research, but I suspect my analysis would hold, with a few exceptions, in other regions in Canada.

Composition from 1900-1950: An Insitutional Requirement

My first argument, the argument I am treating all too briefly, is that composition from 1900-1950 should be understood first and foremost as an institutional requirement in both western Canada and the U.S., and only secondarily as a reflection of attitudes about rhetoric. There is little doubt that composition was taught through different kinds of courses—Freshman Composition courses in the U.S. and Literature and Composition courses in western Canada—but if one focuses on the issue of institutional requirement, and the antirhetorical sentiment in both Canada and the U.S., the differences in composition instruction are not as pronounced as the curricular arrangement would suggest. For example, Robin Harris in *A History of Higher Education in Canada* identifies English as the only institutional requirement at most universities between 1920 and 1950 (515), but rather than analyze the significance of this requirement, he argues that the teaching of composition in conjunction with literature in Canada was distinct from the composition courses at Michigan and other American institutions (139). If Harris had focused on the signficance of the institutional requirement rather than the pairing of composition and literature, he might have concluded that Canadian universities did what Sharon Crowley says American universities did. She says the instititutions "usurped [writing] teachers' authority by imposing on them the standardized expectations about the formal features of discourse" (153). Whether taught as Freshman Composition or Literature and Composition, institutional requirements for composition seem to demand

standardized expression rather than rhetorical competence.

Patricia Jasen and Henry Hubert focus on the paucity of rhetorical theory in Canada without directly tying their analysis to the effects of institutional requirements. In her study of the liberal arts curriculum in Canada, Jasen suggests that writing instruction may have been an expressed goal of these classes, but she wonders why, if composition was in fact the goal, literature and not rhetoric was the focus of the course (177)? Henry Hubert, in the conclusionn to his history of English studies in nineteenth-century Canada, provides a reason: "the deeply antirhetorical philosophy that drove English studies at the time" (178). If we look again at what Crowley says about rhetoric in the U.S., however, we see a similar antirhetorical philosophy. Current Tradition Rhetoric, she argues, is no rhetoric, but served the institutional demand for standardized expression (166-68). Composition in both Canada and the U.S. before 1950, then, seems to have been an institutional requirement and taught antirhetorically.

Nan Johnson makes the strongest argument for the presence of composition in Canada, but her interpretation of composition in North America relies on identifying rhetorical traditons rather than focusing on institutional requirements. She argues that rhetoric was not dead at the end of the nineteenth century, but that oratory, composition, and criticism were equally valued (*Nineteenth-Century* 16). She provides details of the importance of composition in the Canadian English curriculum throughout the first half of the century, and argues that the absence of Freshman Composition courses was not due to a neglect of rhetoric, but part of "the distinctive legacy of nineteenth-century Canadian adapt[at]ions of British-style belletristic rhetoric" (868). What is distinctive about this Canadian legacy, however, seems not to be its combining of literature and composition, but the duration of this relationship. Susan Miller argues that composition and literature were taught together at Harvard as the two "elements that a properly evolving national culture would require," but she notes how the two elements gradually were separated

(51). Miller, sounding much like Crowley writing about institutional requirements and rhetorical paucity, emphasizes the social and cultural importance of English's role to "instill in the nonelect the necessary refinements of taste, in the form of correct grammar and spelling, two historically important signs of cultured propriety that Harvard's way of teaching composition was going to provide" (51-52).

Two of western Canada's first four English department heads were graduates of Harvard, and they brought the Harvard values—the concern for grammar and spelling—with them. In 1927, Edmund Broadus at Alberta complained of the weakness of students English, but he primarily feared the shame that such weakness would bring to the students and the institution (89). Garnet Sedwick, upon arriving at the University of British Columbia, wrote to President Wesbrook requesting additional staff to handle composition instruction. Although he does not claim to need to culture the students, he does appeal to the institutional authority, or institutional precedence, of universities across North America using classes of no more than 30 and frequent consultation as a justification for his request. For both Broadus and Sedgwick, composition seems intimately tied to institutional requirements and institutional appearances, a kind of cultured appearance distinct from the Arnoldian view of knowing culture.

The point of this brief history of composition in western Canada before 1950 is to argue that Canadian approaches to writing instruction and the treatment of writing as a university subject up till this time were not significantly different from developments in the U.S. Composition was present in western Canada during the first half of the century, just not as a "Comp" course. The blending of composition and literature was the dominant pattern of instruction, but this pattern was inherited from Harvard. The ends that composition served had little to do rhetoric as we understand it today; instead, composition was an institutional requirement about refinement, propriety, and the culturing of a young nation.

Composition from 1950-1996: National Defense and the Defense of Nationalism

The similarity of composition instruction in the two countries before 1950 makes the developments after 1950 all the more significant. Because of the American revival of rhetoric, composition now has a professional and physical presence in the U.S. that it did not have forty-five years ago. Composition in Canada, by comparison, is invisible. This difference can be explained by looking at the American and Canadian federal governments' response to the Cold War and consequent funding of postsecondary education. The American government made money available to English studies in the cause of national defense; the Canadian government made money available to English studies as part of a defense of nationalism. The Soviets were the enemy for the Americans, the Americans the threat, if not enemy, to the Canadians.

Stephen North argues that in the process of professionalizing, small "c" composition became big "C" Composition in America. He identifies 1963 as the watershed year. Albert Kitzhaber published the first full-length study of college writing, *Themes, Theories, and Therapy*, and he also delivered a challenge to CCCC at its annual meeting. He said that it was time for CCCC to show leadership in the profession of English studies and provide guidance to the teaching of writing (14-15). North argues that this call to professionalize was answered, and Composition moved out of the age of lore and into the age of research.

The initiative for change, however, began in the late 1940s, and is most clearly marked by the first meeting of CCCC in 1949. William Irmscher's brief history of the conference notes its beginning in "practical needs," but he also identifies CCCC's contemporary role in "maintaining professional standards and winning professional recognition in the hierarchy of higher education" (138). While Canadians participate in

CCCC, the teaching of composition has yet to win its place in the hierarchy of higher education in Canada.

The event between 1949 and 1963 that is most frequently cited as influencing composition in the U.S. symbolically if not literally is the Sputnik launch of 1957 (North 11; Applebee 185; and Berlin 120). English in America, North says, did not benefit from the resulting National Defense Eductation Act of 1958. But after the NCTE produced *The National Interest and the Teaching of English* in 1961, more federal money came to teachers of English in the form of Project English (1962) and an extension of the NDEA in 1964 (11-12). This funding didn't last long, but according to North it launched modern composition on its way to professional status. The irony of this increase in funding, he points out, is that the study of literature could not attract federal support, but "composition, the 'service' course, so long considered academic dirty work, *could* attract such money" (13).

The Sputnik-generated crisis in education resulted in increased funding for Canadian universites too, but what Paul Litt calls a "cultural lobby" had managed to ascertain increased funding for the humanities and social sciences in the early 1950s. Litt's study of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences—more commonly known as the Massey Commission after its chairperson Vincent Massey—explains indirectly how and why English departments in Canada were able to continue to ignore and denigrate composition while their American counterparts showed a renewed interest in rhetoric.

Feeling that Canada had emerged as a major player in the second world war and that the process of nation building had been completed with Newfoundland joining confederation in 1949, Canadian politicians turned their attention toward establishing and promoting a unique Canadian identity to present to the world (Litt 17). This concern for culture, you may notice, coincided with American writing instructors concern for

"practical needs." The Liberal governing party of Canada established the Massey Commission as the key weapon in their defense of nationalism. The commission toured the country for a year and heard presentations from arts groups, university representatives, media investors, the business community, and concerned citizens. Although apparently receptive to a wide range of views, Litt argues that the commission shaped its recommendations around its members shared belief in the values of liberal humanism. Litt says: "Liberal humanism requited cultural nationalism's desire for identity with a set of moral values and aesthetic standards that were coherent enough to serve as a basis for national unity and distinct enough from those of American mass culture to provide a unique Canadian identity" (108).

The universities rather than the artists' studios were considered by the commission —almost all academics—to be the "real centre of cultural life in Canada" (Litt 147). The two most significant developments from the Commission both benefited universities: in 1952 the federal government began funding universities for the first time, and in 1957 the government established the Canada Council to directly fund the humanities. These changes validated the study of literature as a subject of national importance and allowed teachers to finally pursue full-scale research. Unlike the American government's funding of practical skills, the Canadian federal government created no need nor incentive to professionalize composition.

In order to provide a bit more thickness to this comparison of goverment funding, I need to acknowledge that the U.S. federal government has a history of funding the Arts that dates back to the 1930s. American federal support for the Arts, however, has consistently been a practical, rather than philosophical issue. According to Lawrence Mankin, President Roosevelt's New Deal funding of the Arts was directly tied to a larger relief project during the depression (83). Milton Cummings Jr. describes how the Arts and the universities fell out of favor with the federal government during the McCarthy era of

late 1940s and early 1950s, the very time that the Massey Commission and the Canadian government showed increased support for postsecondary education (96). Cummings also describes the eventual establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts, a project begun during the Kennedy administration and enacted by President Johnson in 1965. Similar to the New Deal arts programs, the NEA was founded not upon idealistic or philosophical goals, but was established largely because support for the arts appeared to play well with voters (98; 113). Something like the cultural lobby in Canada did push the development of the NEA along, but where Canada had invested the time and effort in a five member Royal Commission, a single man, August Heckscher, was hired as a Special Consultant to the President for the Arts to prepare a report and policy suggestions (Cummings 106). The implementation of NEA and NEH funding came after Project English, after the NDEA extension, and after the professionalization of composition.

For Canadian scholars in the 1960s to have turned to composition and rhetoric as a research agenda would simply have been to Americanize the curriculum and to pursue a low art rather than high culture. Requests for writing instruction in western Canada continued to come from the growing number of professional disciplines, and writing instruction was needed to meet the escalating and diverse student population of the late 1960s and early 1970s. But with the possible exception of Daniel Fogarty, Dean of Education at St. Mary's University in Halifax and author of *Roots for a New Rhetoric* (1959) (see Graves 27-28), Canadian scholars throughout the humanities showed little interest in rhetoric and no interest in composition. The only member of a Canadian university to publish in CCC between 1949 and 1963 was R. G. Baldwin of Alberta, and he wrote only of grading freshman essays, not the teaching of writing.

To bring some concreteness to my argument that the Arts greatly benefitted from the Massey Commission, I will end with examples of developments in English and the humanities at the Universities of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia between

the 1950 and 1990s. In 1949 at the University of Saskatchewan, the very existence of the humanists was threatened by the universities third president, W. P. Thompson, a biologist. Thompson's dislike for the humanities and even the social sciences was pronounced. Michael Hayden, in his history of the University of Saskatchewan says "Thompson eventually came to respect some social scientists and under external pressure he was willing to give some of them some money. The salvation for the humanists came almost entirely from outside—from the federal government through the Canada Council" (202). According to Carlyle King, the English department did not abandon composition in the 1950s, but maintained the literature-composition course as the only required course in the university. The research and teaching interests of the department, however, were literature based. King says the department "offered the first full-lenth senior class in American literature to be given in a Canadian university and the first full-length senior class in Canadian literature to be given anywhere" (13-14). Graves includes Saskatchewan as one of his three case studies of contemporary Canadian universities, and begins his description of writing instruction at Saskatchewan in 1990 by saying, "According to the survey responses, the University of Saskatchewan does not offer much writing instruction. Apparently there is no university-wide policy regarding how to help students develop their writing skills" (63). The impact of funding high culture in the 1950s can still be seen today.

In the nineteen sixties, Canadian universities were becoming increasingly specialized and the faculties of Arts and Science were being separated into distinct administrative bodies. The University of Manitoba did not split its faculties until the 1970s, but in 1964 Manitoba's science students were no longer required to take an English course. Those students were required to choose three course from among literature, history, and philosophy, but not necessarily one of each. "A Brief Summary of the History of Arts and Sciences" says that the "calibre of such previously compulsory

classes improved" (11). Although the "Summary" does not elaborate on this statement, it seems to be implying that when requirements like English composition were removed and students were engaged with the proper material of university study, their performances improved. While it may be difficult to directly connect this change to the effects of the Massey Commission, Arts as an independent faculty was clearly in much better shape than it had been in the 1940s, and English specifically had a legitimate place in the university without teaching composition. 1964 also happened to be the first year of Manitoba's Ph.D. program in English ("Summary" 14), yet graduate students were not expected to teach writing.

Money made available to the humanities at the University of British Columbia in the 1960s did not go towards writing instruction, but towards the kind of liberal education curricular reform that most universities had considered, but could not afford, in the 1930s and 40s. An informational brochure written by Ian Ross of the English department outlines some of the costs of the Arts I program, and he notes that these costs were paid for by an unnamed foundation. Students enrolled in Arts I would receive nine credits for course work organized around such themes as War, Tyranny, Love, and Death ([4]). Writing was not to be neglected in this program, but the method of instruction seems to have been trial and error: students "will receive in ample measure the criticism of [their] peers and instructors" ([10]). Again the impact of the Massey Commission may not be direct, but the availability of funds for liberal arts experiments released students and teachers from the requirement of taking and teaching composition.

Through the hiring of American rhetoricians like Richard Coe, Andrea Lunsford, and Nan Johnson in the 1970s and 80s, UBC became the first Canadian university to move towards professionalizing rhetoric. But rhetoric and composition have not yet made, and may never make, a significant impact in western Canadian English departments and universities as long as reasearches continue to pursue, and governments continue to fund

high culture. Only an English department secure in its institutional position and able to fund its graduate students through sources other than the teaching of composition could refuse to teach writing, as the University of Calgary's English department did in 1992. This kind of security and clear delineation of professional boundaries—the kind of delineation that says English departments do not teach writing—has only been possible in Canada since the Massey Commission.

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